1917?

By EDWIN BALMER.

Herewith is presented the eleventh installment of a fiction serial dealing with what might happen should European powers, after they had settled their own differences, wage war upon the United States. The author, one of the best fiction writers in the country, has based his story upon a thorough understanding of military, naval, and internal conditions in the United States and upon a sound knowledge of military and economic history. The story will cause you to realize the critical situation in which this country and you, your neighbors, and your family are placed by the let-well-enough-alone attitude of the pacifists.

SYNOPSIS.

In Elgin, Ill., live the Ashby family, consisting of Nathan Ashby, owner of the Ashby Brass company, and his wife; a daughter, Nellie, married to Bob Wendell, a navy lieutenant; and Jim Ashby, a son, engaged to Agnes Ware. Nathan Ashby is the archtype of pacifist, deaf to the warnings of impending danger to America. Almost out of a clear sky news is received that the U. S. scout cruiser Salem, proceeding against orders, in the North Atlantic has encountered the fleet of the league of former European enemies and has been sunk, a deliberate act of war. Bob is recalled to Newport News. Spies are discovered in the Ashby works, and evidence of a league of spies that swarm the country and are even enlisted in the army is held by Jim Ashby, who for a time is held prisoner in one of the spies' rendezvous in a fashionable residence in Chicago. Jim after his adventure returns to Elgin. War is on and Jim has signified his intention to enlist. Bob arrives in Newport News to find that enemy aeroplanes have been dropping bombs around the arsenal and on the deck of the Arizona, killing a number of men. The U. S. army aeroplanes are inadequate against the highly specialized air craft divisions of the enemy. With the Arizona's personnel cut down to man mine planters and destroyers, Bob is appointed second divisional officer and the dreadnaught steams out for Hampton Roads and to engage the enemy ships that are bombarding the coast towns. It is the enemy's plan to trap the American fleet into reach of the submarines. They almost succeed, but owing to the heavy fire from American ships have to abandon the plan and flee, not, however, without first sinking one of the American destroyers.

BOB nodded. The Pennsylvania had ceased firing, too. The sun had disappeared minutes before, and dusk was settling swiftly, with clouds blowing up overhead. The enemy's cruisers became only a spot of smoke on the horizon, and soon the smoke disappeared. Wendell saw to the unloading of the guns which had been ready. The rifles of the torpedo defense—the twelve inch five guns on each side of the ship—were still manned, but the crews of the fourteen inchers were crawling out of the turrets. As Wendell stood again on the quarter deck, moving reefs, over which waves were breaking, appeared off to the left—the American K and L submarines steering on the surface and making for the shelter of Chesapeake bay.

Bob watched the tiny craft rolling and tossing almost helplessly as they struggled with the sea; they seemed scarcely to move or hold headway. There was no need to question, as one watched them, why they had failed to gain position from which they could have attacked the escaping Carthage and the Peras; the ensigns in command had all they could do to manage their vessels at all; indeed, the flotilla commander was signaling the Pennsylvania—Bob saw the winking light—for aid. A light from the dreadnaught flashed in reply; the commodore could not spare a destroyer to tender the submarines now, but he was wirelessing the Roads to send a tender.

Wendell gazed back grimly over the rough sea in which the American submersibles were laboring. The regent's underwater boats were back there, too; but, instead of searching for aid, the enemy's submersibles were forcing the American battleships and destroyers to keep on at twenty knots, to man every torpedo defense gun, and double all lookouts. They had showed no more than their periscopes; but every one know what they were—great undersea cruisers capable of keeping to the sea in severe weathers and of maintaining themselves for weeks without a tender.

"God help our K's and L's," some one muttered as the American submarines disappeared into the darkness, "if they run across the regent's Z's."

"I'd swap them chances," some one else rejoined. "We've five destroyers to ourselves and the Pennsylvania this night!"

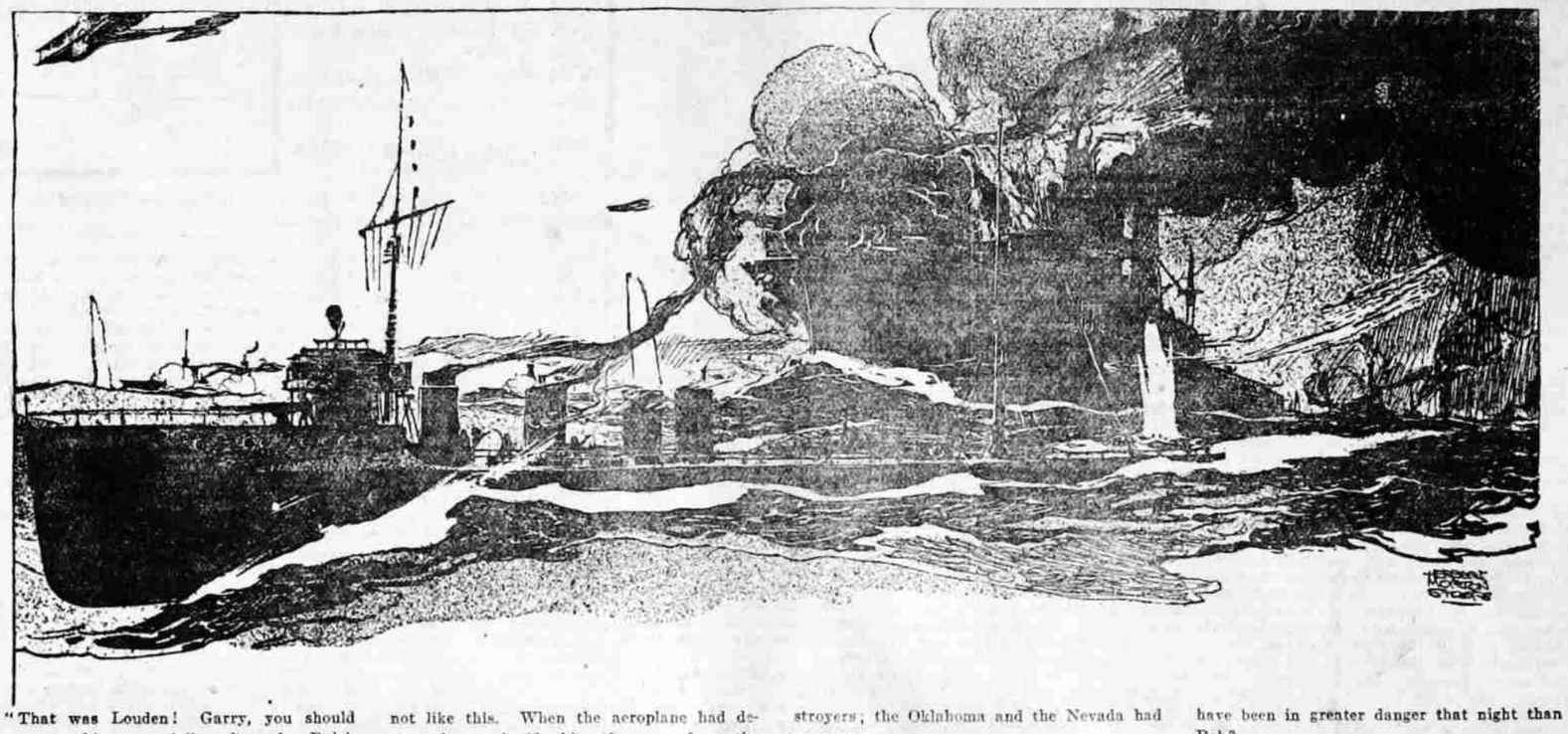
Bob Wendell kept silent, but he followed the feeling of his companions. The K and L boats were taking terrible chances; but certainly neither the Pennsylvania nor the Arizona could spare them a convoy. With the Balch gone, five destroyers remained to do picket and outpost duty for two superdreadnaughts. Four for each ship would be a minimum for safety; the regent protected even his cruisers of the Pera class with four destroyers each; it was known that the prince's dreadnaughts had six or eight destroyers apiece.

Night was coming down, close and clouded; the wind, which had been steadily rising, blew in uglier squalls. The radio, which flashed to the shore the news that the Americans had lost the Balch, but, in return, had damaged the Carthage and one Pera, brought back the weather warning in the navy code; a hurricane was on the way. The government had forbidden the publishing of the warning ashore, lest it be sent to the enemy's ships, too; but the barometer told the story. Rain was falling now—rain, driven almost horizontal by the gale and ceasing suddenly while lightning flared and forked over the sea and thunder tremendously rumbled.

About 8 o'clock Bob Wendell went to the wardroom for supper. Torpedo defense requires all gunnery officers to be on duty during firing; but, although torpedo attack by destroyers was still possible, the weather made it more and more improbable and the lightning was flashing so frequently as to illumine the sea for seconds at a time. Accordingly, officers and men were being sent, in small groups, to supper.

Bob sat beside Garry at the table. It was the first time they had seen each other since the battle.

"Good shooting from number two turret, Bobby!"



"That was Louden! Garry, you should have seen him—especially after the Balch got it."

"I heard; his brother was boatswain—so he gave the Pera that last shot!"

"By the way, did you see it? Where it hit, I meant."

Garry hesitated a moment. "Something funny about that; I'm crazy, of course—for we were out of range then—but I've an idea that shot hit, somehow. I didn't see any splash, but then, if a shot's pretty short, it's easy to miss a splash."

"Not for you; some damn good spotting today, Garry. The men—well, they just felt it! A couple of the Carthage's thirteens hit the Pennsylvania, of course you know."

"On armor. No real damage, was there? We weren't missed by much a few times."

Then they talked of what was ahead of them. The Arizona and the Pennsylvania and the destroyers had not turned back to the Roads; they were keeping on south and east. The officers spoke in low tones, and after the mess attendants had served them.

"The special god who looks after drunken men and fools has sent the administration this hurricane!" Garry ejaculated. "Look at the fix we were in—one division at New York, ours at Norfolk, the Delaware and North Dakota at Charleston, and most of the rest of our decent ships beating it up from Haiti and the gulf as fast as they can make it. The administration's special Providence put a finger in that, too; the ships we have to have were on the way when the Salem succeeded in taking the president out of his trance. But at that, we were up against it till this wind came along. In any reasonable weather, their aircraft would be scouting everywhere to find where we are—with their battle cruisers and perhaps a division of their Sargons they could have cut off any division of ours they wanted and stopped us from ever getting a fleet together. As it is—if prexy's private pet Providence doesn't entirely ditch us now—we'll be where we should have been all the time."

"The Oklahoma and Nevada, with some more destroyers, are coming out, I suppose you know. They left the Roads just at dark and will join us about midnight."

Garry nodded: "To try a little surprise party on the prince in the morning. . . . Going up again now?"

"No; I've next watch. I'm to sleep now."

"So'm I."

They went to their rooms together. "Good luck!"

"Good luck!"

* *

Wendell went to his room and closed the door. It was the first time since he had been in battle that he had been away from the observation of his fellows, alone. He stood for a moment, dazed at the relax within himself, and for an instant he opposed it, then he sank down upon his bed and lay on his back staring up at the painted steel of his ceiling. He had fought in battle!

It could not have been the peril of it which had excited and exhausted him so; it could not have been, for the long hour, the ever imminence of obliteration. Except for the trying, waiting minutes of inaction after the submarines attacked, he had scarcely been conscious of reckoning his chances for life or death; something far mightier, more masterful and overwhelming, had absorbed him.

Besides, so far as danger went, he had been in terrible peril before—there was a time, on the side of the Matterhorn, when a snow storm came and he and a companion and a guide had clung to an icy crack helpless for more than an hour, when a slip by any one of the three would have dragged all to death. Personal peril there had been as great and had lasted as long as this battle today; the danger of his ride with Jim after Ingouf, when the spy had turned to throw his bombs, had been even greater; when Bob first boarded the Arizona in the afternoon, and the aeroplane dropped its explosives, he personally had been nearer obliteration than he had since.

But the battle! How was it so different from other dangers? Because while another was trying to kill him he also was trying to kill? That was not it; for, when Ingouf tried to kill him, he had killed Ingouf, and it was not like this. When the aeroplane had destroyed men beside him the guns from the ships were firing up at the plane, but neither was that like this. Those things were all petty—personal; that was it; everything before this had been personal, and battle—battle was not personal at all. Or it had not been personal till now—this moment when he was alone at last, shut in his room away from the rest, with Nellie's picture in the drawer of his desk.

He sat up and leaned over and opened the drawer and took out the picture and gazed down at it. The sight of her face—her lips which he had kissed so many times, her dear, soft eyes gazing straight into his, steadied him for the first seconds and then unnerved him. Women and children, some one had said, had been killed—torn to pieces, probably, and dismembered—when the Carthage and the Peras had shelled Ocean City and Virginia Beach to "draw the American ships out."

Well, the American ships had come out; and he had fought his turret and given them shells for the shells they had sent at Virginia Beach. A mast was down on the Peras; other shells must have hit; he must have killed some of the murderers aboard. But while he was squaring that score the regent's submarines were striking, too. The Balch had gone down with all hands while the Arizona had had to steam by at full speed.

Little "Stubby" Derr, Bob had learned, had commanded the Balch. He was not in Bob's class, but Bob had got to know him pretty well when they both were on Chinese station together. Stubby was "a game little chap"; Bob remembered the Army-Navy football game in Stub's last year, when—well, Bob knew just how Stubby spoke to his men and smiled at them when everything was done and there was nothing left to do but cheer the ship you saved, as it went by, and then go down with your own.

And Stub, too, had been married; in his little steel walled cabin, now deep down under the water, he had his picture of his widow. Did she know it? "Destroyer Balch lost with all hands." That was a sentence of the message which had gone to the shore. When and how would it reach—her? Was there now a baby—Bob wondered—or a baby-to-be? What had little Stubby Derr seen when, at the last moment, he was alone and need no longer smile at his men?

Bob got up and opened the door; it was choking close in there with the port closed and covered. He started as he saw some one standing without; it was Garry Starnes at the door of his room. Garry, too, had found it close and stifling; his collar was loose, and he had taken off his coat, but, like Bob, he had not further undressed.

"It's hot," Bob said to him simply.

"Awful."

The friends faced each other an instant fairly. The same thought was in the hearts of both, and they both knew it. Neither would say it to the other, nor would either deny it as their eyes met. What they had seen happen to Stubby Derr was soon to come to them; when the great battle was joined, only the luckiest of chances could save either of them. The end might come before the great battle, of course; it might come tonight, at any moment.

Garry stepped back into his room; Bob returned to his and put out the light. He lay on his bed, trying now to sleep, but quite unable to. There were a thousand things which he had meant to say to Nellie, and none of which he had said. He sat up once and started to find the light to write to her, then he lay down again. Those were not the sort of things one could write; she would not understand them seeing them sprawled on a sheet of paper; he wanted her to know that if he did not come back she should marry again, that he would prefer that; he wanted her to know . . . His mind would not stay on that. Would his baby be a boy or a girl, he wondered; would he ever know? How was it with Garry? Was it harder to think of a definite little boy tonight or to be as he was? And Stubby Derr. . . . "Up two hundred! Up!" . . . "I was 'on' and, you see, sir, my brother was boatswain of the Balch." . . . "That was right, Louden." . . . "It's no use now; no use." . . . Bob went to sleep.

A few minutes before midnight he was roused; he buttoned his collar, got into his coat and shoes. The rolling of the ship, the impact of the water outside his port, the crashing thunder told that the storm was severe again; he seized his raincoat and hurried to his watch above. Ross, whom he relieved, pointed to him the positions of the other ships; in addition to the great bulk of the Pennsylvania, showing in green silhouette as the lightning flashed, there were two other great dreadnaughts and half a dozen new destroyers; the Oklahoma and the Nevada had come up.

Except for the dim glows reflecting directly down upon the water to show their positions to the other ships of the squadron, the great vessels steamed without lights; only now and then, as a lightning flash seemed to show something moving over the waves; a destroyer turned a searchlight through the blackness about; and once, at an alarm which brought all men aboard the battleships running to torpedo defense stations, a gun clattered from the Aylwin and Bob saw the streaks of the shells as the "tracer" lights flared on the backs of the projectiles traveling toward the target. Simultaneously the searchlights showed a destroyer stealing toward the squadron. Fifty guns spat at it; the blackness was streaked by the flares of the "tracer" lights and the destroyer tried to escape. But while the searchlights still showed it a shell struck a torpedo board, and before the Aylwin reached the spot the enemy's ship was gone.

"That squares for the Balch!" Bob said to himself when the firing had ceased, but as he repeated it he grew more tense when the lightning again gave him sight of the sea; and throughout the American ships every officer and man remained at torpedo defense stations. Had the enemy destroyer sold itself well? Was its appearance a forerunner of a greater torpedo attack; or, before the vessel blew up, had it wirelessed information which should bring upon the American squadron a superior force of the enemy in the morning?

The four dreadnaughts were steaming to surprise the regent's ships which were known to be detailed to cut off the American ships coming from the gulf; would surprise now meet counter surprise?

For a little longer, at least, God rode in the hurricane. A war vessel—she was a great ship with one mast gone—was ashore and pounding to pieces off Cape Hatteras. Life savers were trying to get to the wreck; but she had foundered deep and far out. The Arizona's radio picked up the news first at 2 o'clock. An hour later more news came. The life savers had rescued some of the men from the wrecked ship and wreckage was coming ashore. The vessel was the armored cruiser Gerel of the Pera class—damaged in the fight with the Arizona so that when the storm came she did not steer. Fifty officers and men had been killed by gun fire; of the remaining six hundred, thirty-four had been saved. When the news was brought him, Bob saw to it that word was passed at once to Louden.

How strange was war! The news that the Gerel was lost with almost all her crew had brought to Bob exultation, triumph; yet, in the wild maelstrom of the sea off Cape Hatteras, his countrymen were risking their lives in little boats to save a score of that crew—that crew who in the morning had shelled Virginia Beach. And, likely enough, inside the Hatteras keys, or in protected waters elsewhere, the enemy submarines were waiting out the storm, or along the coast they were lurking on shelves of sand a hundred feet below the surface. Well, at least tonight they could not strike, and the regent's aircraft also must be useless. But was not the gale beginning to lessen? There was no doubt of it; and through the clouds to the east there was showing the gray of dawn.

Nellie Wendell, on her knees by the window of her room in her father's house at Elgin, saw the dawn. The news had come in the evening that the ships from Hampton Roads had been engaged; they had driven off and damaged several of the enemy's ships. Nellie did not know certainly upon which of the American ships Bob was; she was not certain, indeed, that he was upon any of them; but she believed he had been in the battle. The bulletin which came to Elgin gave no account of American casualties; so, as she waited for more definite word, she prayed—as those who wait must often pray—in perfectly irrational petition. She prayed that her husband had not been killed. Of course if he was killed, he was killed, and prayer could not alter that; but thus that night Nellie had prayed as girls and women like her were praying in ten thousand homes.

With the dawn, strangely there came to her faith that her husband still was safe; so convinced was she of it, somehow, that she bent her head in an utterance of thanksgiving to God for having brought her husband through the battle; then, humbly, fervently, she petitioned that he still might be spared.

How empty and strange the big house was! Bob was away, of course; Jim also was gone. The door of his room stood open. He was with his regiment in Chicago, where there were terrible mobs and rioting, the bulletins said; troops had fired and had been fired upon; bombs had been thrown and many militiamen killed. Was it possible that Jim might have been in greater danger that night than Bob?

Nellie's mother was alone in her room. Nathan Ashby was away. He was no longer in the jail, under arrest; Sibert of the secret service had succeeded in showing that Ashby's connection with Homan was without significance, and that he knew nothing of the doings of Ingouf and Emloe at the works. Nathan Ashby had been released to go east for conference with officials of the National Arms company.

Thus it was to Nellie and her mother alone with the maids in the big house that news came during the day that the Gerel of the enemy had been wrecked off Cape Hatteras after having been damaged in battle. In the afternoon mail there arrived, much delayed, a letter which Bob had scribbled on the train and mailed in Ohio the morning after he left. It told her nothing of where he was to go; he did not mention even if he had received more definite orders; it told her only of his thought and his love for her. She clasped it close and wrote to him at once again; she had written twice already, addressing him in care of the navy yard, Norfolk.

That night—although publication of the movements of American ships had been sternly forbidden—it was known that the scattered American squadrons had succeeded in concentrating during the great storm without serious encounters with the enemy. It was known that a division of the new American dreadnaughts, steaming by night through the hurricane, had surprised and driven off a detail of the regent's Carthage battle cruisers and Sargons which had attempted to cut off and destroy a squadron of American battleships racing up from the gulf. And so, the next day, arrived the intelligence that the American first and second battleships were gathered in a fleet and must move soon for the great battle with the enemy.

On the morning of the fifth day Nellie heard, for the second time, from Bob. As before, the letter was all about her; nothing about himself, except that he was on the Arizona. She understood that he could not tell more; but the letter half maddened her by its concealment of what she had to know—had to know about him—and what it could so easily have told. He had received one letter from her and was happy for it; where he got it, and how, he did not tell, nor was there postmark or other indication of where his letter was mailed. She read the dear lines of his writing over and over again, and she was at her mother's desk and was writing again to him when some one entered the room.

Whoever it was came a few steps inside the door and then started back. Nellie turned and saw Agnes, and at the sight of Agnes' face Nellie was on her feet, cold and trembling.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Nothing," Agnes denied in panic. "I—I wasn't looking for you. I was looking for Mrs. Ashby; I'm going."

But Nellie caught her. "Something's happened, Agnes!" she said tensely. "You've heard something; what is it; something about Jim?"

"No!"

"About father?"

"No!"

Nellie had known that. "Bob?"

"No!"

"Agnes, I might as well know now as later."

"Nellie! The fleets are fighting! They've—they've been fighting since 2 o'clock. All our ships and all of the regent's fleet are fighting, they say. They're off the New Jersey coast, out of sight of land; but they can hear the guns ashore!"

Nellie's eyes gazed through and through Agnes. "That"—her lips steadied and she went on—"that is all you know?"

"That's all, I swear."

Nellie gazed at the clock. It was after 8; the great battle by that time must be over. She stared down dimly at the letter, almost finished. She sat down again at the desk, and as one in a trance she added two lines and wrote her name below them; then she sealed the letter and stamped it.

"We'll mail this on the way," she said quietly to Agnes. "I'm going with you to where they'll get the reports first."

* *

"A strange experience came to me that night," said Nellie's letter, which Bob had received last before the fleet put to sea for the great battle. "It was the night, dear, of the hurricane on the coast; and I knew that you had been in battle. I was taken with terror for you; I am confessing it. I was on my knees by the window of the room which had been our bedroom, praying in desperation. Bob, I lost all control of myself, I was so afraid! Then the thing came, my husband; a vision! It was not a dream, for I was wide awake—only alone in the dark, just before dawn. I was looking toward the east, where you were, and I saw you and knew that you were safe. There was something strange about it which I could not understand at all; but it told me you were safe. More than that, it told me you would still be safe. You see . . . It was very strange, Bob. You were with me again by the side of a road and our baby was born. I saw it again last night, as I was sleeping that time, and it was very clear. So you are coming back to me; I will see you again—that I know. God has promised it to me."

Bob put down the letter with the others which he had reread and locked them all away in his desk. It was time for him to be up on deck.

"Ships in column!" the signal was flying from the halyards of the new Idaho, which led the American line. The Arizona, second in power only to the Idaho, was taking position in column 500 yards behind; astern the Arizona, as Bob saw when he gazed back, the sister superdreadnaught Pennsylvania was placing herself third. The Oklahoma, Nevada, New York, and Texas steamed next in order; then two older dreadnaughts, the Arkansas and Wyoming, followed by the Florida, the Utah, Delaware, and North Dakota.

These completed the roll of the dreadnaughts—the first line battleships of the United States; but, astern them, the column of ships still stretched, the Michigan and South Carolina, the New Hampshire, Kansas, and twelve more of the old, predreadnaught vessels of the second line. Five more such vessels might have been there, Bob knew, but their fighting value would be even less than the weakest in the line and they would have taken a knot from the speed of the fleet. As it was, the column could do no better than eighteen knots; it was steaming at sixteen now, letting the light cruisers and destroyers dash ahead to watch the waters for drifting mines and for submarines. Aircraft circled overhead; some of them, scouting, were bringing back to the flagship intelligence of the enemy's strength and disposition. The American fleet was steering north and east.

The van of the regent's fleet had just come in sight, steaming north, also, and west. The regent's ships seemed to be in column, too—in a line appearing almost parallel to the American column but really slanting a little, so that the two columns, in battle formation, approached each other slowly. There were but twenty-two ships of the line in the other column, against the American twenty-nine; but every vessel in the European line was a dreadnaught. Their order, as reported by the aircraft, was repeated to the officers on the Arizona's quarterdeck. Six Trajans led, the four Pharaohs followed; six Sargons steamed next; then the four superdreadnaughts of the Zeus class; the two Thors were last. With twelve twelve-inch guns each and with a speed of twenty-one knots, the Thors were the weakest and the slowest in the European column. Four great battle cruisers stood off to lee, as reserve; and the European destroyers, double in number to the American, darted ahead and abeam of the battle line.

It was quarter to 3, ships' time, when the Idaho signaled to the column to alter course, and the flagship sheered a little to the left; the Arizona, steering straight to the point where the Idaho sheered, altered its helm likewise, and the rest of the fleet followed. The tops of the Trajan—the flagship of the regent's line—were in plain sight, with the tops of the Xerxes, Varon, and Floron following. With their superior speed, they were attempting to gain position across the van of the American line and rake the leading ships; so the American column was changing course to keep the enemy on the beam. The two columns steamed on almost parallel, therefore, but still gradually converging and bringing the leading vessels of each line within range.

The day was bright, and the sun, high in the sky, gave little favor to the gunners of either fleet—what favor there was lay with the Americans. The sun glared down into the water and disclosed to the observers in the hydroseroplanes of both sides the movement of submarines. The guns of destroyers clattered continuously as the craft darted back and forth on their charges for the protection of the battleships. But the destroyers of the two sides did not seek duels; only the aeroplanes hurried to engage before the battle and drive their opponents from the sky.

The conditions were almost perfect for battle in which gun power—the ability of the great turreted fighting ships to give and to take—must decide. Mile after mile the bat-

(Continued on following page.)